

Delaware & Hudson Canal Was Pioneer Coal Carrier

The News today presents the first of a series of articles devoted to the history of the Delaware and Hudson Canal. The articles were written by E. D. LeRoy, member of the Board of Trustees of the Wayne County Historical Society, and have been appearing in The Monthly Bulletin of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Internal Affairs, beginning with the October, 1945, issue.

Other articles in the series will appear in subsequent issues of The News. The first article:

By E. D. LeROY
Member, Board of Trustees of
Wayne County Historical Society

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(First Article of Series)

"Maurice, you must hold onto that lot on the Lackawanna that you took for debt from David Nobles. It will be valuable some day for it has stone coal under it". It was Samuel Preston speaking to Maurice Wurts on Market street, Philadelphia, in 1814. Paul Preston was present and recalled the conversation years later. Whether or not Maurice Wurts was aware of the wealth beneath his land we do not know, but this sound advice may easily have been the foundation upon which one of the greatest private enterprises of the early Nineteenth Century was built.

This enterprise, the Delaware & Hudson Canal, was the result of the industry and foresight of Maurice Canal, was the result of the industry and foresight of Maurice and William Wurts and their efforts to haul the coal of the Lackawanna Valley to the eastern market.

This not the place to give a detailed history of the anthracite coal fields, but the fact that anthracite, or "stone coal," existed in the Lackawanna and adjoining Susquehanna Valleys was known as early as 1763, for it is mentioned in the charter granted to the Wyoming Valley settlers by the Connecticut fathers. There is a record of anthracite having been used in 1755 by a gunsmith of Nazareth, Pennsylvania, who, having run out of charcoal, used a quantity of "stone coal" bought him by an Indian in payment for work done on his gun.

Coal Floated Down River

During the Revolution coal from this locality was floated down the Susquehanna River to the Carlisle Arsenal for use in the manufacture of arms for the American soldiers, but the residents of the valleys of the Susquehanna and Lackawanna Rivers were slow to realize the value of the black stones which lay beneath their farms; even after Judge Fell of Wilkes-Barre made the experiment which he recorded in the fly leaf of his books:

"February 11th 1808—

"Made the experiment of burning the common coal of the valley in a grate in a common fireplace in my home, and found it will answer the purpose of fuel, making a clearer and better fire, at less expense, than burning wood in the common way.—

Jesse Fell"

In the spring of that same year John and Abipa Smith floated an arkload of coal down the Susquehanna River to Columbia, but not until the following year did they succeed in inducing some of the residents to buy a few tons.

These very briefly are the highlights in the history of the North Eastern anthracite coal fields prior to 1814, when the Wurts Brothers began their purchases of coal lands in the Lackawanna Valley.

It appears that David Nobles, a well-known hunter from the Lackawanna Valley, had become acquainted with Maurice and William as early as 1812, during one of their hunting excursions in Wayne County. The improvident Nobles was about to be imprisoned for debt and the Wurts advancing the money to pay the debt, took title to his property on the Lackawanna in return. During 1814 William seems to have taken Nobles into his employ and together they explored a great expanse of the Lackawanna Valley, mapping the coal out-croppings, and purchasing what land they thought of value at from 50 cents to \$300 per acre.

Water Route Only Solution

That there was coal in the Valley was evident even to such amateurs as they, but his problem was transportation. The local population was of no consequence and in fact, had little interest in coal with wood so plentiful. Coal laden rafts, or arks, could, without much preparation be floated down the Lackawanna and on down the Susquehanna without great difficulty